ARE WE THERE YET? : MIGRATION AND HOME IN LITERATURE

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Abstract

KIMBERLY V. ZDANOWICZ: Are We There Yet?: Migration and Home in Literature
(Under the direction of Dr. E. Jane Burns)

Migration stories appear frequently in Latin American Caribbean and African American literatures. Loida Maritza Pérez’s Geographies of Home and Erna Brodber’s Louisiana are two novels that include stories of migration between the Caribbean and the United States. Migration and movement offer the female characters in these texts a method of resistance to the specific categorizations of gender, race, and nationality. The process of migration changes the concept of home as these categories are renegotiated. As the concept of home is renegotiated, it becomes more than just a single geographic place. Instead, home is realized as many geographic sites and psychological spaces. Geographic and feminist theory offer useful perspectives and a powerful lens through which to study these categories in terms of resistance.
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Introduction

I can’t tell you how far we are from there. We might be barely out of our own shores. There are no borderlines on the sea. The whole thing looks like one. I cannot even tell if we are about to drop off the face of the earth. – Edwidge Danticat, Krik? Krak!

I begin with this quote from Danticat because it addresses the arbitrary and artificial manner in which borders are created. Migration stories and their function in literature are central to this discussion of the boundaries and borders that are crossed so often in Caribbean literature. The boundaries that are transgressed in Caribbean literature are not only geographic, but include the borders of certain categories of identity as well. The topic for this thesis arose from an awareness of the frequency and intensity of migration stories appearing in the literatures categorized as African Caribbean and Latin American Caribbean, specifically novels in these categories written by women authors. Loida Maritza Pérez’s Geographies of Home and Erna Brodber’s Louisiana both stage questions of home in relation to displaced protagonists whose gender, subjectivity, nationality, and race are changed and challenged as a result of their migrations. I chose these novels from a diverse selection of novels I read in preparation for this project because they represent female-authored migration stories that foreground the concept of home and the categories of femininity, color, origin, and ethnicity that are challenged through migration. Pérez’s novel, Geographies of Home, is categorized as Latin American Caribbean since Pérez is Dominican. Louisiana is often categorized as African Caribbean literature and taught in African American literature courses.
since Brodber studied in the United States and her novel is set mainly in the U.S.iii Both novels include stories of migration from the Caribbean to the United States and back. For some characters these voyages are mental or spiritual as well as physical.

The protagonist of Pérez’s *Geographies of Home*, Iliana, identifies as a Black, Latina Dominican-American woman. The protagonist of Brodber’s *Louisiana*, Ella, identifies as an Afro-Caribbean-American woman. Problems of categorization arise in these novels and in others written by authors who have immigrated, migrated, emigrated, and been exiled, because they claim multiple nationalities and often speak, write, and publish in multiple languages.

Both feminist theory and geographic theory treat the concept of home frequently and in depth as a topic and site of struggle over power and choice when discussing the categories of nationality, gender and race. Geographic theory, specifically migration theory, questions categories from the perspective of borders and geographic scales and how borders function and categories change or have the possibility of changing as they cross borders. Geographic scales imply the scale in which geographic issues are considered. A scale describes the range and degree in which geography is studied. These scales range in size and degree, from the scale of the body to that of nation to worldwide.

Physical space and the borders that categorize it into separate countries, or other geographic categories, influence the many other categories of the culture within those borders. Nationality, gender, and race are all influenced by the country in which they are formed. Geographers ask questions as people move or migrate transnationally, such as: Do their ideologies or concepts of these categories change? Are these ideologies more likely to change? Do the people migrating conform to their new environment? And if they do change
or conform, on what geographic scales do they do so? Do these changes take place on the public, private, or bodily scales, or a combination thereof? In this context negotiating a definition of “home” is crucial in navigating categories of origin, femininity, and color. By resisting the specifics of categorization as they negotiate the concept of “home,” the female protagonists Geographies of Home and Louisiana claim power for themselves as migratory subjects.

Rachel Silvey argues in her article, “Borders, Embodiment, and Mobility: Feminist Migration Studies in Geography,” that migration is “a socially embedded process” that reinforces genres of difference (138). Difference in this case includes racial, ethnic, and ideological differences. She views feminist migration research as a way to question the boundaries and borders that categorize these differences in all their specificities. Silvey asks in particular how migrant bodies are constructed as they move transnationally and cross geographic borders and the boundaries that categorize their differences. In “Hierarchical Households and Gendered Migration in Latin America,” Victoria Lawson argues similarly that feminist analyses offer a perspective that values difference in contrast to traditional analyses which seek to find harmony, even if it means overlooking critical aspects of migration studies. She writes, “Rather, feminist analyses focus on intrahousehold hierarchies of power and examine struggles over decisions, rules, obligations and gender ideologies” (42). Silvey expands Lawson’s argument to a larger scale, considering multiple geographic scales in her examination of power and migration.

In her argument, Silvey questions what happens to gender relations as transnational migration brings boundaries to a “critical arena of political action” (141). These questions and arguments are productive in looking at categorization as constructed, as well as
something that is not fixed, but fluid. Patricia Pessar and Sarah Mahler argue the point that
gender and its related categorizations are “fluid, not fixed” in their article “Transnational
Migration: Bringing Gender In” (2).

The concept of fluidity is important in discussing migration as resistance to specific
categorization. Fluidity of boundaries of the categories that define subjectivity, such as
origin, femininity, ethnicity, and race, and resistance to specific categorization in these terms
are central aspects of migration in Geographies of Home and Louisiana. The characters
wrestle with their identities, what they are and what they think they should be. Gender, race,
body, and nationality are all issues which with they grapple in this struggle. Each character
deals with his or her own set of concerns within the nonlinear forms of each narrative; these
nonlinear narratives often create chaotic and realistic portrayals of migration. A linear
narrative is not appropriate to migration stories because it organizes these stories that are not
organized and makes them compact and chronological when they are not. In Geographies of
Home and Louisiana, migration functions in corporeal and cognitive senses, as characters
migrate physically from the Caribbean to the United States and mentally back and forth.
Pessar and Mahler discuss three elements of geography in their work: “geographic scales,”
“social locations,” and “power geometries (4).” Cognitive and corporeal migrations add a
richness and depth to their discussion (5). Pessar and Mahler describe these two types of
migration, questioning whether they include the possibility to change or reinforce gender
ideologies, to what degree, and how.

The option of fluidity to move and flow from one category to another or occupy
multiple categories simultaneously is the most powerful option of all when considering
resistance. By moving between categories the characters of Geographies of Home and
Louisiana successfully resist the specifics of the categorizations of gender, nationality, and race. Considering characters who occupy different temporal spaces and physical locations, as well as psychological spaces, the resistance of categories is successful and important to them in expressing their cultures, past and present and in valuing difference and a multiplicity of locations.

Carole Boyce Davies, a literary theorist who also deals with the topic of migration in literature, discusses resistance to categorization. Her book *Black Women, Writing and Identity: Migrations of the Subject*, and especially its introductory chapter, “Migratory Subjectivities,” are useful in understanding geographic, literary, and feminist theory working together in an interdisciplinary manner. Davies recognizes the importance of geography and feminism to literature and offers a perspective that uses them together in a complementary way. In this introductory chapter, Davies coins the term “migration horror stories” to refer to migration in literary narratives that generates a sense of movement and fluidity. She defines migratory subjectivities as multiple locations of Black women’s writings as well as the “Black female subject refusing to be subjugated” (36). It is this combination of multiple locations and a refusal of subjugation that creates the peculiar form of resistance Davies outlines. She suggests that migratory subjects should be viewed in terms of “elsewhereness” and “slipperiness” (Davies 36). Her concept of slipperiness coincides with that of feminist geographers, like Silvey, who emphasizes movement. Considering how the slipperiness of migratory subjectivities works within literature, Davies writes:

Migratory subjects suggests that Black women’s writing cannot be located and framed in terms of one specific place, but exist/s in myriad places and times, constantly eluding the terms of the discussion…In the same way as diaspora assumes expansiveness and elsewhereness, migrations of the Black female subject pursue the path of movement outside the terms of dominant discourses (36-37).
Davies is not using terms, such as Black, women, and female without unpacking the contextual weight and complexity such terms carry. She dedicates a section of her chapter to explaining the delicacy and richness of such categorical terms: “Each therefore must be used provisionally; each must be subject to new analyses, new questions and new understandings if we are to unlock some of the narrow terms of the discourses in which we are inscribed. In other words, at each arrival of a definition, we begin a new analysis, a new departure, a new interrogation of meaning, new contradictions” (5). According to Davies, then, even using categorical terms elicits movement and a constant deferral of meaning.

Debra A. Castillo discusses feminism in relation to Latin American literature by women authors in her essay “Finding Feminisms.” In this essay Castillo signals that this elusion of categorical terms is necessary to resistance of silencing difference by agreeing to limiting terms. One cannot resist the differences of identity that are often silenced by the use of categorical terms without attempting to escape these terms altogether. She argues that it is more practical than an idealistic “breaking of silence” and claims: “It is more reasonable in such circumstances to reflect upon options for thwarting cooptation or recuperation of the feminine within established models through a practice of tactical resistance, of deliberately eschewing polished definition, deliberately finessing issues of closure, deliberately unraveling the familiar, uncomfortable fabric of self and society” (Castillo 356). The “unraveling the familiar” that Castillo calls for signals the importance of constant reexamination of where feminism stands in relation to Latin American literature by women authors. iv

Feminist theorist Peggy Kamuf also comments poignantly on the need for feminist theoretical formulations never to occupy a single place, and to avoid academic categorization
by always remaining in motion. In her essay, “Replacing Feminist Criticism,” Kamuf employs a geographic terminology of “erosion” to write about fluidity of theoretical and conceptual, not physical, borders. This is important since Kamuf argues against mainstreaming feminism and leaving it without question in academia. Her argument demonstrates that the borders that exist everywhere need constantly to be questioned. In this essay Kamuf claims that feminism’s reluctance to become either “canonical” or “an outlying and unexplored region” is beneficial to theories of borders. She writes: “…what feminist thought can and has put into question is the capacity of any map to represent more than a fiction of the world’s contours” (Kamuf 111). This is an extremely powerful metaphor that questions the truth of any human-made boundaries. Kamuf’s description of maps can be applied as well to the borders of categories that help define characters’ subjectivities in literature and to geographical boundaries as they are determined in discourse.

It is at this point in Kamuf’s article that her thoughts on “erosion” are fleshed out. She suggests that feminist practice constantly works to move and shift “historical sedimentation” and allows a “lack of finality” in its discoveries (111). In looking at borders, categories, boundaries, and geography, the most useful aspect of Kamuf’s article is its powerful conclusion that:

It is tempting, of course, to assume that, once drawn, the lines of a representation can resist the eroding movement of fluid element, and can keep the sea of fictions from wetting feet planted firmly in the ground. But that would be to deny a necessary plurivocality and plurilocality which even here, for example, press on the edges of these remarks. I am left, then, with room enough only to conclude from necessity: the necessity of replacing this discourse with another and of always finding another place from which to begin (111).

In this discussion of feminism and its place in the institution, Kamuf raises the key points of plurilocality and plurivocality, which can be defined as a multiplicity of locations and voices,
respectively. It is the fluidity across categories that Kamuf suggests in her argument that is most pertinent.

A recognition of the theoretical importance of fluidity to feminist thought, it seems from Kamuf’s argument, would allow the plurivocality and plurilocality she describes to be valued and made visible, as they are in Davies’s argument. Indeed, plurivocality and plurilocality are features of the subjectivities of the characters in Louisiana and Geographies of Home. Brodber and Pérez create subjectivities in multiple locations at once and give multiple voices to a single character. This multiplicity of voices and location creates neither a schizophrenic perspective nor a dizzying effect. It does allow these authors to write the past and present simultaneously and as existing in locations that are not cotemporaneous.

Feminist theorists traverse many disciplines, geography being one of them. Feminist geographers provide a unique lens through which to view geographic issues, especially migration, in literature. Feminist geographers study gender ideologies, gender roles, scales, borders, and nationality, showing how all these elements become interwoven through migration. Researchers of feminist geography are often interested in cultural production, such as literature, art, music, and film, as a response to migration. Literature offers geographers an opportunity to examine ways in which cultural production influences migration and how it is determined by migration in return.

Gender ideologies are powerfully affected by migration in Pérez’s Geographies of Home and Brodber’s Louisiana. The issues of what gender a character claims and how others perceive him or her and why, all come under close scrutiny when characters are displaced from their homelands. What a woman is in one country compared to what a woman is in another country becomes a point of criticism, and if the woman from the first
country moves to the second but claims both sites as formative of her nationality, what is the
result? In Pérez’s novel, the women all have different gender ideologies, which are formed
from the combined effects of socialization in the culture specific to their countries of origin
and their destination, the U.S. The problems that arise from misconceptions and self-
perceptions reflect the internal as well as the external struggles these women face coming to
terms with gender ideologies and migration.

Racial issues resulting from migration also focus on internal and external struggles
within the female characters that Pérez and Brodber display in the novels. Within the
families in the novels there are even discrepancies and intense debate over race. The
members of Pérez’s Dominican family have varying shades of skin and speak Spanish due to
their Dominican origin. Some members identify with Black and Latina heritage, while others
deny that they have any African heritage. The parents of the families in both novels attempt
to override racial issues with religion and in effect their children, either consciously or
subconsciously, communicate their feelings of confusion at the neglect of their parents when
racial issues arise, whether at home or in larger public arenas.

The concept of home in particular is deeply rooted in feminist theory. Home has been
considered a site of struggle as well as a place of comfort and belonging by many feminist
theorists. The dyadic nature of the concept of home, especially when considering a topic like
migration where home can be a number of physical places and psychological spaces, offers
many possibilities for theoretical exploration. Both Pérez and Brodber skillfully include
home as a theoretically-loaded concept in their writing. It is a central site of struggle over
nationality, gender ideologies, and racial issues for their characters. It is also where their
characters sometimes feel most grounded and have a chance to regroup. The most dynamic
characters do come to recognize home not only as a physical or geographic location, but as an emotional space and a variety of physical locations.

In her introduction to migratory subjectivities, Davies quotes the feminist writer bell hooks in describing home. Davies writes, “Still, ‘homeplace,’ as bell hooks would term it, can be a site of resistance if one understands some of the historical roots of oppression. And in this context, movement or crossing-over is a necessary antidote to the paralysis of oppression and depression…” (16). This passage demonstrates how hooks, a feminist theorist, views home as a site that one must leave in order to grow healthfully and progressively. However, home is not always or only a site of struggle as hooks explains, “At times home is nowhere. At times one knows only extreme estrangement and alienation” (qtd. in Davies, 49). The dyad of home and its use and importance as a theoretical concept in stories of migration is recognized and employed by both Brodber and Pérez. Migration and home are used differently in each novel. Brodber uses the concept of home to explore issues of migration, while Pérez takes the reverse approach. Pérez explores the concept of home through her discussion of migration. Iliana, the heroine of Pérez’s Geographies of Home, deals with issues of migration as they come up in her negotiations of what home is to her. Brodber’s heroine, Ella does not realize what the concept of home means to her until she begins migrating. Both migration stories would certainly qualify for Davies’s definition of “migration horror stories.” There is nothing simple about them.

Migration and movement do offer the women in these texts a method of resistance to specific categorizations of gender, race, ethnicity, and nationality. The ways migration and the concept of home are used in Geographies of Home and Louisiana sheds light on how these intersecting categories are negotiated in the processes of migration and defining a
concept of home. Familial arguments over what race family members identify as and how feminine the female characters must prove themselves are examples of these negotiations. The theories employed in this thesis, geographic and feminist theory, offer useful perspectives and a powerful lens to study these questions in terms of resistance in two female-authored texts. Home is a concept that must be individually defined by the characters as well as the geographic scale on which many of the struggles for power over decisions dealing with these categories take place. Resistance, in *Geographies of Home* and *Louisiana*, offers the possibility of movement between the categories of gender, race, and nationality, and brings the concept of home to the forefront of this discussion of migration. This resistance highlights issues of power and who holds it and why. The categories called into question rely on hierarchies of power in order to keep them neat and clean. By resisting the specifics of categorization, the women in these novels claim power for themselves as migratory subjects.
Chapter I

Loida Maritza Pérez’s Geographies of Home

Loida Maritza Pérez’s novel, Geographies of Home, tells the brave, haunting story of a family that has migrated from the Dominican Republic to New York City to seek a better lifestyle and opportunities for the children. The story exemplifies the obvious overlapping of geography and literature that a tale of migration might: mapping, nationality, and borders. But there is much more than that. Pérez’s subtle interweaving of migration into the characters’ subjectivities—thereby writing migratory subjectivities—, is what this chapter will address. Geographic theory can be a rich resource for literary analysis and proves especially useful for exploring the ways that crossing borders and changing nationalities inform issues of borders, nationality, and identity in this novel. Work on topics such as gender and migration by authors such as Silvey and Lawson, provides a unique lens to highlight these aspects of migration literature that may have previously been overlooked or not given as much attention as they deserve. The work of feminist geographers Pessar and Mahler is particularly useful in studying Pérez’s text because they address the issue of categorization. The questions these feminist geographers ask include categories such as gender and nationality, but the perspective taken by Pessar and Mahler also provides a way to question resistance to forms of closure that result from categorization. These categories apply specifically to a Dominican text as characters deal with renegotiating machismo gender ideologies, differences in perception of ethnicity and race according to skin color and language, and living life on the hyphen of nationality.
Migration plays a leading role in the formation of the characters’ identities in *Geographies of Home*. Their gender ideologies are shattered upon arriving in the U.S. and new gender roles are explored and performed. The eldest daughter Rebecca moves to the U.S. first to work and send money for her parents. This is unusual for a single, young woman from the Dominican Republic, but her parents allow her to migrate alone as a young woman because she is helping them so much. Rebecca then goes from abusive relationship to abusive relationship seeking someone who can provide security for her and only finding herself battered and alone with her neglected children.

The youngest daughter, Iliana, presents the greatest challenge to her family’s perspective on gender. She convinces them to let her go to college although she is a woman, which is unheard of until that point in her family, “When her brother Vicente left for college, she, despite being female, had claimed similar possibilities for herself…With Vicente’s help, she had eventually persuaded her parents that it was respectable, even desirable, for a single woman in the United States to abandon home for school” (Pérez 43). In addition to defying the gender ideologies of the land from which she migrated, she defies the gender ideologies of the United States because of her unique looks.

Besides being accused of looking like a man by her brothers and sisters, Iliana is publicly harassed for being a drag queen on a street corner. After this incident she seeks comfort from her friend, Ed, “‘Ed, look at me,’ she instructed, leaning close. ‘Do I look like a drag queen to you?’” (Pérez 74). When he jokingly takes his time to answer and contemplates, she asks again, “‘Then why the fuck did those guys act like I was one?… I was waiting for the light to change at Astor Place and noticed these two men, good-looking too, staring at me from across the street. When the light changed and I walked past them, they
shouted, ‘Drag queen in style! And look at her walk!’” (Pérez 74). Constantly heckled about her ambiguous looks and the fact that her only male companion is her gay friend, Ed, Iliana internalizes others’ judgments and feigns indifference.

Iliana is a character that Pérez uses to describe how migration affects gender ideologies and roles. We see this in the ambiguity of her gender identity as well as her defiance of the typical gender ideology of the Dominican Republic for a woman her age. Usually the machismo ideology would prevent a woman from taking such initiative and allowing the independence that is granted Iliana. Much of the questioning of gender ideologies that occurs through Iliana’s character fits into Lawson’s description of what feminist analyses provide: a “focus on intrahousehold hierarchies of power” (42). Iliana’s character faces these hierarchies daily upon her return from college for an extended stay with her family. She is thrown back into, as Pérez writes, “the politics of being home” (30). Besides being understood among feminist geographers, as a geographic scale, the concept of home is theorized in literary and feminist theory for its complexity and idiosyncrasies. While pleasant at times, home provides Iliana with many issues with which she must deal, such as her sister’s abusive relationship with her husband and children, her other sister’s mental instability, and her family’s seeming ambivalence to the issues of race, nationality, and gender that constantly arise in the form of unresolved arguments.

Earlier in her article, Lawson presents her position on household power struggles, stating that, “These household divisions of labour are fluid and complex, emerging from material inequalities among household members and from the operation of socially constructed gender ideologies” (40). It is at this point that Lawson lays out the central issues of her argument, “I argue here that the inner workings of migrant households (in both origins
and destinations) are key to re-examining the classic migration questions – who migrates and why, what are the material consequences of migration, and how does mobility rework gender divisions of labour and gender ideologies and identities” (40). This argument is central to this study of migration literature.

That Pérez stages these struggles over power and gender into her novel Geographies of Home is meaningful from a geographic perspective as well as a literary perspective. The inclusion of these struggles in Pérez’s writing reflects not just on the fiction she has produced, but also on the culture that has produced it. Feminist geographers, especially, are concerned with cultural production regarding migration, whether that migration is cognitive or corporeal, and its consequences. It is also important to note that Lawson defines the divisions as “fluid and complex” because this fluidity and complexity is seen throughout the novel in the way gender ideologies begin to change (40). This is specifically true for the gender ideologies of the father, Papito. Papito embodies the ideology of machismo common to many Latin American cultures.

Papito is the character who has the most difficult relinquishing or negotiating the machismo gender ideologies of his origin and therefore has a difficult time adjusting to the new gender roles his family members accept after living in the United States. It is difficult for him to negotiate the independent, assertive ideology his daughter, Iliana, has adopted in the United States. He is heavily influenced by migration and demonstrates it in the kinds of power struggles discussed by Lawson. Although he supports Iliana’s college education, when she returns home his strict rules based on his own ideologies are enforced. Despite the fact that Catholicism is the most prevalent Caribbean religion, Papito has converted to the
Seventh Day Adventist religion upon arrival in the United States seemingly because its followers support a strict patriarchal rule similar to machismo.

Iliana obeys her father’s Seventh Day Adventist rule of abstinence while at home and while at school. Still a virgin, she does not date and primarily associates with only one man, her friend, Ed. Toward the end of the novel an incident occurs in which Iliana’s older, mentally unstable sister, Marina, rapes her with her fist. Marina herself had been raped and has been suicidal and unstable ever since. Iliana flees to her friend Ed, and although she doesn’t find him, remains away from home in an effort to cope with the situation. This is one among many, specific levels of negotiation that take place. After staying out late that night, she returns home to find her father angrily awaiting her. He does not realize what has happened to her and unleashes his rage at what he assumes is her disrespect. Pérez writes, “His arm swung up so fast that she had no opportunity to move out of its reach. ‘Shameless hussy! Whore!’… ‘I don’t care what you did while away at school! But as long as you live under this roof you will abide by my rules and God’s!’” (312-13). This powerful passage exemplifies Papito’s unwillingness to change and the extent to which this blinds him to the reality of his daughter’s condition.

Iliana’s mother, who knows what has happened to her, stops the confrontation. Iliana has been pushed too far and is planning to leave home that night. She confronts her father: “‘Are you through?’ she asked, her tone venomous enough to convey to her father that she meant more than whether he was through with her and meant as well was he through with life, with pride, with the righteous man he had believed himself to be” (Pérez 314). These struggles over power in the home and the hierarchies that are at play in this example demonstrate Lawson’s point about how migration affects power and gender ideologies on a
household scale. Iliana has been attacked by her father, the head of the household, therefore the top of the hierarchy and the one with the most power. He attempts to keep her in check and in her place in the hierarchy with his outburst. Her mother is in the middle, acting as mediator, although she is effectively powerless in the end and Iliana gains power by leaving the hierarchy. In addition to the way migration affects the characters’ gender ideologies and roles and the power struggles this causes, migration affects other aspects of their subjectivities and identities as well.

Nationality and race become complicated as a result of migration in the novel. Being from the Dominican Republic, the characters speak Spanish. Some of the children identify as Hispanic and deny any black subjectivity. Iliana, darker skinned than her siblings, identifies as Latina and black and is furious at her siblings for looking down on and being ashamed of dark skin. She has dealt with racism after being away at college and people acting on the assumption that she is African American because of her skin color. Having returned to New York, Iliana reflects on the racism she faced at school and how unexpected it was since she thought she had escaped it by being among highly educated people. Pérez writes: “She had clung to this belief despite hearing the word ‘NIGGER’ erupt from the lips of strangers; seeing swastikas scrawled on the walls of synagogues; and witnessing women, marching to ‘take back the night,’ attacked for calling attention to the town’s hidden violence” (71). Besides being abused by racism, she is pushed and pulled between her black and Latina friends.

The issue of nationality is not only affected but also highlighted by migration and complicated by race. Questions of origin and nationality plague Iliana her entire life. The categories of nationality and ethnicity collapse for Iliana. Pérez writes:
She used to hate the question ‘Where you from?’ because few of her classmates knew of the Dominican Republic and several of her black friends assumed that she claimed to be Hispanic to put on airs. ‘What you talking about, girl?’ they’d ask. ‘We don’t care where you come from! You be black just like us!’ ‘Nah, you speak Spanish. You one of us,’ her Puerto Rican friends would say. She used to feel like a rope in a game of tug-of-war (190).

Iliana faces racial slurs on both ends of the rope and everywhere in between. Her racial and national identity, while resolved for her, remains unresolved throughout the novel for others and her family, whose own race and nationality are even more unresolved for themselves.

Gloria Anzaldúa expresses the same tensions in discussing her identity in her essay, “La Prieta.” In the section titled, “Who Are My People,” she asks: “What am I?...They would chop me up into little fragments and tag each piece with a label. You say my name is ambivalence?” (205). It is not ambivalence that causes Anzaldúa to reject these categories: “Who, me confused? Ambivalent? Not so. Only your labels split me” (205). The metaphor Pérez uses of Iliana feeling “like a rope in a game of tug-of-war” shows the impossibility of slotting her into any single category of race, nationality, or ethnicity. Anzaldúa concludes her essay with a similar metaphor: “I walk the tightrope with ease and grace. I span abysses. Blindfolded in the blue air. The sword between my thighs, the blade warm with my flesh. I walk the rope—an acrobat in equipoise, expert at the Balancing Act” (209). This passage from Anzaldúa’s essay signals that resolution may not be attainable, but that, as she states she has done, one may need to “achieve a kind of equilibrium” (209). This equilibrium is what Iliana seeks and is constantly dissuaded from in her arguments with her family.

One of the first confrontations in which Iliana engages upon returning home is with her older sister, Marina. Marina asks Iliana if she’s found a “blue-eyed hunk yet” (Pérez 38). When Iliana responds that blue-eyed is not her preference, Marina assumes she has something against white people. In the end, after Iliana identifies as black and her sister
denies being black at all, “I’m Hispanic, not black” (38). Iliana can’t understand why her sister is denying this aspect of her race and identity as a Dominican. Here the family acts as a microcosm of a larger macrocosm of institutionalized racism. Castillo writes of this tension between the “pure” ethnicity of Hispanic and the “impure” ethnicity of *criolla*, or mixed race, in her book *Talking Back: Toward a Latin American Feminist Literary Criticism* (15-16). Castillo describes an “inferiority complex” that women hide by “overstressing ‘macho values’” and writes, “In this manner the woman, as the primordial site for the metaphorical generation of discourse, must of necessity embody those unchanging, pristine values of permanence, privacy, immobility, and purity as the essential core of national identity” (16). Because of the colonial presence in the Dominican Republic for so long, some Dominicans deny their African heritage in order to deny their connection to slavery.

Her parents make no mention of how they identify in terms of race, although they are proud of their Dominican heritage. Most aspects of their heritage are not denied. They do not deny their poverty, their happiness, their troubles, or much about their pasts in the Dominican Republic. The mother, Aurelia, does hide certain aspects of her family’s heritage from other family members. These aspects are presented in a chapter dedicated to a flashback. Aurelia is remembering when her mother gave her certain items linked to her past, a past she wished to deny.

Aurelia’s mother, Bienvenida, gives her a quilt that has a remnant from each of her deceased family members sewn into it. She also gives her a small bag with items which triggers a dream that scares her. After receiving the quilt, Aurelia reflects on the primary aspect of her past that she wishes to deny: “Aurelia considered what her mother had already bequeathed to her: an ability to perceive the invisible that only she and Virgilio, from among
their siblings, had inherited. This ability was what had driven her brother mad and tormented her into seeing and hearing what others couldn’t” (Pérez 134). Aurelia maintains other powers she has inherited as well, such as shape-shifting and certain powers often associated with voodoo. While voodoo often is associated with negative connotations in the United States, in the Caribbean it is a positive form of spirituality linked to an African heritage. Aurelia’s brother, Virgilio, has committed suicide and it is that legacy she is attempting to prevent by withholding the information from her husband and children. She is trying to protect her family from their past.

It is hinted at that Iliana has inherited the same ability, as has Marina, although Marina’s “gift” errs on the side of Virgilio’s, causing her to be mentally unstable. This ability and not knowing her past cause Iliana to feel even more like an outsider in the U.S. Her mother denies this past and by not sharing it with her husband, causes a distance between them as well. Aurelia attempts to repress the family history by hiding it and converting to her husband’s religion, Seventh Day Adventist. Migration makes the religious conversion more difficult, as this ability is more common on her Caribbean island, she feels, than in the United States. This chapter of *Geographies of Home* as well as the chapter dedicated to Papito’s reflection upon his first love in the Dominican Republic to which he cognitively returns, are examples of what Pessar and Mahler describe as cognitive migration. Migration makes the past and present difficult to negotiate as closure upon situations left behind is often not afforded.

Pessar and Mahler argue that it is necessary to include cognitive migration in migration research because it can result in material consequences just as influential as those of corporeal migration. They claim that an understanding of cognitive migration is necessary
to their discussion of social agency and migration. Although they recognize the difficulties in “measuring cognitive agency,” they feel it must be included: “However, there are cases where people may not take any transnational actions that can be objectively measured (the latter exemplified by, for example, remitting funds, writing letters or joining transnational organizations), yet live their lives in a transnational cognitive space that does have measurable effects” (Pessar and Mahler 5). We can see a fictionalized version of “cognitive migration” in those chapters of Pérez’s novel that represent characters who travel back to the Dominican Republic in their minds. Material consequences result from these migrations.

Both Aurelia and Papito have been participating in cognitive migration back to the Dominican Republic and effectively wishing away parts of their lives in the United States. They are not only migrating cognitively to the Dominican Republic in order to escape their lives in the United States. As Suzanne Oboler explains about Latin American migrants in general, in her book Ethnic Labels, Latino Lives: Identity and the Politics of (Re)Presentation in the United States, migrants, specifically female migrants, participate in a maintenance of their history. Oboler states, “Women have long taken on a fundamental role not only in the fight for daily survival but also in maintaining the historical memory of the silenced in the Americas. For, as in the United States, the official history of Latin American countries has also been written largely as a history of exclusion of various groups based on race, class, and status” (169). Aurelia and Papito fear they will forget their histories and traditions if they do not visit them by cognitively migrating. This fact is vocalized during a conversation between them toward the end of the novel. Aurelia is upset with Papito for living in his hopes to migrate back to his origin although it is financially impossible, and she says, “Then let’s stop talking about how we’re gonna move. It was fun for a while, but we’re
stuck here and no amount of wishing is going to change that fact” (Pérez 234). Papito has already planned how his children will be affected and how they will be rich if they return to the Dominican Republic.

Aurelia’s hopes of migration have dissipated: “‘I’m sorry,’ she said. ‘It’s just that I can’t go looking ahead to some other time and place. I’ve been doing that way too long…I know we’re tired. Me as much as you. That’s why I want to focus on how we’re going to live right here and now. This is home, Papito’” (Pérez 234). Brenda Yeoh discusses the tension between origin and destination homes for migrant women in her article, “Transnational Mobilities and Challenges.” In this article, Yeoh argues that home is specifically a site of exile for women and that migration holds unique complications based on gender. She writes, describing an adaptation to the new country: “Migrant women hence continue to shoulder the ‘pains and gains’ of simultaneous embeddedness in ‘home’ and ‘host’ countries, and the need for constant mobility in linking the two in order to sustain the family” (Yeoh 65). Aurelia experiences this type of tension between the two countries she considers home as a migrant woman. Although she would love to return to the Dominican Republic, she thinks migrating back would not be the most practical option considering her children and their lives in the United States.

These ruptures in the characters’ lives and identities arise as a consequence of migrations, both cognitive and corporeal. The problems are never resolved for the characters in Pérez’s novel, but are constantly revisited and therefore categorizations of nationality and gender are never complete. There is no final destination. Closure is resisted in every area, allowing the characters to be multiple things and in multiple places simultaneously.
Home is never static as a result. It is a dynamic physical and psychological domain in this novel. It is not one, but many places and spaces. In her article, Yeoh looks at family relations and the concept of home through a transnational lens, and explores what this means in terms of gender roles and performance. As Yeoh cites specific case studies, she concludes that home can be many things. It can be a site of struggle, exile and alienation, comfort and kinship, or any combination of these kinds of ties.

For the characters in *Geographies of Home*, home is many different combinations of these elements, some of which are painful at times and joyous at others. The tension Aurelia feels, similar to the “simultaneous embeddedness” described by Yeoh, and all the complex implications of home are present in a moment of reflection after she visits her daughter Marina in the hospital after she has attempted suicide. “Simultaneous embeddedness” signals that, in this case, Aurelia is engaged in living in both the Dominican, cognitively, and the United States, physically, at the same time. Pérez writes: “In the presence of strangers like those she had sheltered herself from since her arrival in the United States and in a hospital worlds removed from the New York depicted on postcards her eldest daughter had mailed to the Dominican Republic, Aurelia for the first time had granted herself permission to sprout roots past concrete into soil” (137). Although she will never fully establish herself in her identity as a citizen or resident of the U.S., Aurelia revisits the issue of what home is and what it has the possibility of being to her.

She reflects upon what has prevented her from detaching herself fully from the Dominican Republic, in the sense that it is the only place she lets herself consider home while living wholly in the U.S.:

Throughout more than fifteen years of moving from apartment to apartment, she had dreamed, not of returning, but of going home. Of going home to a place not located
on any map but nonetheless preventing her from settling in any other. Only now did she understand that her soul had yearned not for a geographical site but for a frame of mind able to accommodate any place as home (Pérez 137).

The “frame of mind” that Aurelia describes in this passage exemplifies how psychological space can function as home just as well as a geographical place. Aurelia is looking for a compromise of the contending values of home discussed by Yeoh. Pérez writes this complex character’s difficulties well, allowing all the subtleties of the situation that have arisen from migration to be visible.

Home is a central concept to consider in migration studies and literature of migration. It is where many of the power struggles over issues of gender and nationality arise and often remain unresolved. Gender ideologies and gender roles are grappled with as migrant families and individuals attempt to decipher the subtle differences and changes occurring all around them as well as within themselves. Migration also allows for many questions about gender to be reconsidered through a transnational lens. Pessar and Mahler raise an interesting question on this topic that is central, it seems, to any research on gender and migration: “Does this multiplication and dispersal produce even greater opportunities for the reinforcement of prevailing gender ideologies and norms? Conversely, does transnational migration provide openings for men and women to question hegemonic notions of gender and to entertain competing understandings of gendered lives?” (6). This question and Pérez’s perspective on the answers is present in her fiction.

Pérez’s characters experience variations of both possibilities; the latter proves to be the case for Iliana, while the former does so for Aurelia. Iliana is allowed to change her father’s perspective by convincing him to let her go to college. The variation she experiences is that she must always follow his strictures upon returning home. Aurelia must deny aspects
of her past that are not in agreement with her husband’s religion, but she can work to help provide for her family when they are in need. Pérez’s dualistic approach to writing the gender ideologies of her characters is more realistic than giving them static, unchanging perspectives.

Pérez’s novel is an excellent example of cultural production that allows for another kind of measurement for feminist geographers studying migration. Many of the questions feminist geographers raise and the complexities they encounter are staged in Geographies of Home. The novel is also an excellent resource for literary scholars studying migration, geography, feminism or any combination of these in relation to literature. Considering the current and continued increase of globalization in the world today, this combination of literature and geography is necessary for those interested in taking a progressive look at literature. National literatures are becoming transnational literatures. It is becoming more difficult to study national literatures independently or comparatively as they become more intertwined due to higher rates of migration and globalization.

Novels like Pérez’s Geographies of Home offer a rich source for literary academics as well as geographers and those seeking to explore interdisciplinary perspectives on literature. Just as national literatures are becoming entangled with each other forming transnational literatures, academic disciplines are requiring more interdisciplinary approaches to the topics surrounding globalization in their respective disciplines. Categorization is becoming more difficult not only in literature dealing with migration, which often resists categorization altogether, but also in the academic disciplines that study it.
Chapter II

Erna Brodber’s *Louisiana*

Subjectivity in Erna Brodber’s novel, *Louisiana* takes on a fluid form because of the novel’s setting. The multiple locations of the setting, both geographical and psychological, create the constant deferral of categorizations of origin, race, and gender for the female characters in the novel. Some male characters experience similar deferral, although this is shown through the narratives of the female characters. The term “migratory subjectivities,” borrowed from Davies, lends itself well to this form of subjectivity that eludes the specifics of categorizations of nationality, gender, and race. The mobile form of Brodber’s setting functions to foreground movement, not just geographical movement as in physical location, but subject positioning as well. The more movement occurs in the novel the more power Ella, the main character of the novel, gains for herself. The issue of movement is central to Brodber’s depiction of Ella’s subjectivity. She is in the process of “becoming.” Ella will eventually become Louisiana once the process is near completion. She must first move physically to Louisiana and travel spiritually back to Jamaica, her country of origin.

Ella’s story begins in New York, after migrating from Jamaica, as an only child of parents convinced that she should become a medical doctor in order to succeed. Ella attends college and becomes an anthropologist and is asked to document a woman’s life that is a legend in Louisiana. Ella feels dissatisfied with her life, but does not recognize her feelings until she moves to Louisiana to begin her documentation. Home for Ella is a site of struggle
that she must leave in order to begin her process of becoming. Her parents do not teach her of her Jamaican heritage or tell her anything of her or the family’s past there. She deduces what she can: “From the little bits those two let out it seems my father left me in my mother and went off to Central America where he found that he wanted her company permanently, came back to get her, married her and took her away but not, for whatever reason their child, only few months old” (Brodber 38). Her parents return for her after the death of her grandmother, with whom she had been living in Jamaica. They are staunch Protestants and see church, education, and work as the most important aspects of life. Ella questions everything once she moves to Louisiana and meets Mammy, another migratory subject. Ella’s struggle with the concept of home spurs Ella to continue migrating and this migration initiates her resistance to categorization.

Brodber foregrounds geographical movement in various ways, but one of the most prominent ways in which she does so is by triangularization. Zora Neale Hurston describes this angular aspect of African American literature in her article, “Characteristics of Negro Expression.” She claims that after “adornment” angularity is the most “striking manifestation of the Negro” (Hurston 34). Hurston states, “Everything that he touches becomes angular. In all African sculpture and doctrine of any sort we find the same thing” (34). Hurston provides the examples of pictures hung at angles on walls and furniture arranged at an angle. She claims, “I have instances of a piece of furniture in the middle of a wall being set with one end nearer the wall than the other to avoid the simple straight line” (Hurston 34). Hurston’s descriptions of angularity and the avoidance of a straight line are applicable to Brodber’s writing in Louisiana. Brodber sets her characters at angles in
relation to one another, geographically and spiritually. Triangularization is a form of angularity since triangles include three angles, not just two points on a line.

This triangularization is not only applicable to physical geography, but to spiritual space as well. Spiritual space is used in much literature from the Caribbean, especially migration literature, to represent an ethereal movement or migration back to one’s origin or movement through time and space. In this case, the main character, Ella, who eventually metamorphoses into Louisiana, is in another space spiritually, yet not physically, when she experiences something like a seizure at Mammy’s funeral. Ella describes the site as similar to the actual physical location of the funeral but not quite the same. She states, “The water in St Mary’s parish, Louisiana flows down embankments protected by thick growths of shrubs. You walk across a grassy lawn to get there. That’s not where I was, though my place bears some resemblance to it. I was at a place that had added something to it and had subtracted something from it, that had edited the St Mary bayou” (Brodber 35).

Brodber works spiritual triangularization into her narrative through her characters and their geographic origins. The central spiritual triangle includes Mammy, Lowly and Ella. At one point in the novel, Ella tries to focus on one of the “files” she has created to contain the memories transmitted to her by Mammy and Lowly via the recording machine, which she has been lent by Columbia University for an anthropology project, when she contemplates her part in the triangle. Ella thinks, “My thoughts had gone way out of the schedule laid down in my scheme and now I was preoccupied out of turn by file 4 and transfixed by the nature of my place in the triangle and in particular by the fact that the sisters possessed a history of me of which I had just the faintest glimpse, a history so personal and tucked away—flying and the old lady” (Brodber 64-65). Previous to this comment Ella had described Mammy and
Lowly as “two halves of an orb” (Brodber 62). She continues to state that, “…there is a suggestion that a physical orb had been transformed into a spiritual one which crossed the seas and earth and heaven and held in Mammy’s translation the hope of a more productive bonding and subsequent action” (Brodber 62). Ella is considering the fact that Mammy and Lowly have a shared last name, Grant, and were both born in St. Mary’s in different countries, Mammy in Louisiana, USA and Lowly in Jamaica. Ella notes that Silas, Mammy’s husband, is a common thread between them, which creates another triangle of characters and places.

Brodber records a tradition, though it may not be a mainstream tradition, of migratory subjectivities with Jamaican women that allows them to gain power through movement. Ella comes to see a variety of locations as home through her discussions with Mammy and Lowly and others in Louisiana. Brodber’s delicate interweaving of many storylines lends itself to creating fluidity within the writing of the novel itself. The fluidity of Brodber’s writing style mirrors the fluidity with which her characters move. It is this fluidity and movement that defines them as migratory subjectivities.

As Davies explains it, migratory subjectivity describes a “radical Black diasporic subjectivity” (37, author’s emphasis). This subject is a “resisting subject,” as Davies calls it, which cannot be thought of “as primarily in terms of domination, subordination or ‘subalternization,’ but in terms of slipperiness, elsewhereness” (36). She applies the idea of migratory subjectivity specifically to Black women’s writing. She states that this writing, “cannot be located and framed in terms of one specific place, but exist/s in myriad places and times, constantly eluding the terms of the discussion” (Davies 36). It is this existence in “myriad places and times” that can be seen in Brodber’s Louisiana.
Davies description of migratory subjectivities offers a specific example of Kamuf’s more theoretical writings which call for constantly revisiting categories to examine their borders. In a later work by Davies, an article titled, “Beyond Unicentricity: Transcultural Black Presences,” she discusses how a hierarchy of geographic centers functions to displace and marginalize experience that is not considered valuable and therefore silenced by the dominant center. She writes, “I define Unicentricity as One-Centeredness, a logic which demands a single center (intellectual, economic, political, cultural, geographic) from which all emanates” (Davies 96, author’s emphasis and parentheses). She then discusses how the concept works to marginalize experience, stating that these centers must be recognized as artificial constructions.

These centers can be seen as any essentialist center that takes on meaning and becomes reified as such. She concludes:

The single center logic, then, is the basis of dominance and control, for it functions with other communities in terms of competition, hierarchy, and subordination. What is centered becomes the most important, the proper, the politically appropriate. Rather than an interactive logic of multiple, relational spheres of interest, in unicentricity, something has to be centered (Davies 96).

The idea of a migratory subjectivity which exists in Black women’s writing, as Davies describes it, works to de-center these centers and allow “an interactive logic of multiple, relational spheres of interest.” This is the type of subjectivity that Brodber’s Louisiana pursues through triangularization. By bringing experiences of the margin to the center, Brodber’s writing values previously silenced voices and stories. She recognizes plurilocality and plurivocality described by Kamuf as necessary for consistently providing a new point from which to begin. In Brodber’s writing each new point links to another triangle of geographic locations and migratory subjectivities.
In Brodber’s novel, Mammy, whose given name is Sue Ann Grant-King, moves from Louisiana to Chicago and back to Louisiana again. Ella sees this migration as an important part of Mammy’s story. Ella tells Mammy, “And Mammy, what we want to know, to be truthful, what those people want to know, but as it happens, I want to know too, is what life was like for you, so go right back and tell me all about Louisiana; tell me about leaving Louisiana; why you chose Chicago; how it was settling into Chicago and how and why you came back to settle here” (Brodber 17). Mammy has moved because of her political activity in the Garvey movement and because of the strong intuition and psychological space with which she is in touch. This psychological space which she occupies guides her intuitively to move. It is also a demonstration of the “resisting subject,” to borrow a term from Davies (36). Mammy is guided to move out of Chicago so that she will not be subjugated for her activity in the movement. The “elsewhereness” of her subjectivity, the constant movement, allows her to resist political domination and a reified subjectivity.

Ella has her own geographical triangle, in addition to her participation in Mammy’s and Lowly’s triangle because of her participation in their stories. Her triangle is similar to Lowly’s triangle. Lowly, whose given name is Louise Grant, is originally from Louisiana, St. Mary, Jamaica. She migrates to Chicago because of her education level and the possibility to advance in the States, and she comes to Chicago where she gets a job in a boarding house. Lowly meets Silas and Mammy in the boarding house and the three of them work on their intuitive skills and begin their participation in the Garvey movement. Lowly returns to Jamaica and Mammy moves to Louisiana. Points on their triangles coincide in Chicago and the two different Louisianas, while other points of their triangles overlap with Ella’s triangle of migration.
Ella was born in Jamaica, follows the migration of her parents to New York, and leaves New York as an anthropologist to do field work in Louisiana. Her field work becomes something other than imagined initially, a recording of a Black woman’s story in the South. It becomes her life. Ella shares the geographical site of Jamaica with Lowly and her experience of Louisiana with Mammy. These overlapping geographical triangles generate an intertextuality in their stories and forge complex ties in their relationship. Ella’s geographical triangle works to de-center the typical, intellectual center: the university and academia. She discovers she can learn in new ways and learn material that, in the parameters of the university, would not be considered “academic.”

Before she becomes Louisiana completely Ella slowly adapts to life in Louisiana with her boyfriend, Reuben. They share a living space and she wonders how people perceive her:

Moreover I sensed a kind of impatience with me. I felt it had to do with me as a woman but couldn’t figure out what was the precise problem. Did it matter that I was sharing my life with a man who hadn’t married me?...Was there some bow or salaam that the female part of the duo ought to perform and I had not so done? Or did they think me out of order to be walking out with this man when I should be cleaning the house or doing some other female chore? (Brodber 49).

Ella recognizes the regional and colloquial differences in the culture she now inhabits in Louisiana as compared to her prior Harlem home. She concludes, considering that perhaps they want a message from Mammy via her, “Well there was nothing to tell or that I wished to tell, so if the discomfort were to disappear, it would have to find some other route. Gender was the pre-determined one as it happened. It was right there in the traditional division of labour that the change came” (Brodber 49). Reuben ends up doing the shopping for groceries and Ella stays in more often to work on her transcription and clean their cottage. This eases the discomfort she has sensed. Most importantly, this passage brings the category of gender to the forefront. Despite the fact that Ella falls into a more traditional lifestyle, eventually the
fact that she is a visionary who can see the pasts of the people she reads, and that the borders of her own identity are constantly crossed in her psychic abilities, allows her to cross boundaries of gender, race, and nationality that form identity.

Once she has adopted and adapted to her new way of life as a woman who sees into people’s pasts and helps them understand them and a woman who communicates without paying heed to the linear boundaries of time, place and space, Ella becomes Louisiana. She receives a pendant on her birthday to mark the change. She describes herself at this point as the hole in the pendant which joins its points. She tells the reader to form a diamond with his or her fingers and to imagine it as a whole with a hole through the center. Ella, now Louisiana, says, “That hole, that passage is me. I am the link between the shores washed by the Caribbean sea, a hole, yet I am what joins your left hand to your right. I join the world of the living and the world of the spirits. I join the past with the present” (Brodber 124). Here Brodber describes how Ella/Louisiana’s migratory subjectivity eludes the linear boundaries of geographical location, she is the link between shores, and of time, she connects the past and present. She does this all the while being a “hole.”

This concept denotes the “elsewhereness” discussed by Davies in her vision of a Black female subjectivity that “asserts agency as it crosses the borders, journeys, migrates and so re-claims as it re-asserts” (37). Davies compares this type of subjectivity to diaspora. She states, “In the same way as diaspora assumes expansiveness and elsewhereness, migrations of the Black female subject pursue the path of movement outside the terms of dominant discourses” (Davies 37). Brodber’s writing of Ella/Louisiana’s subjectivity demonstrates how this Black female subject, when seen as a migratory subjectivity, can allow for a fluidity of boundaries and boundary crossings that a reified subjectivity would not
allow. It also shows the connection between diaspora and subjectivity and what constitutes a
diasporan subjectivity. Besides her subjectivity as Louisiana, the actual physical location of
the geographical Louisiana can be seen to function as an “elsewhere.”

Ella’s transformation into Louisiana, after she has moved to Louisiana and discovered
the extent of her psychic abilities, reveals her to be the communicatory connection between
Mammy and Lowly. Brodber writes:

In me Louise and Sue Ann are joined. Say Suzie Anna as Louise calls Mammy. Do
you hear Louisiana there? Now say Lowly as Mammy calls Louise and follow that
with Anna as Louise sometimes calls Mammy. Lowly-Anna. There’s Louisiana
again, particularly if you are lisp-tongued as you could well be. Or you could be
Spanish and speak of those two venerable sisters as Louise y Anna. I was called in
Louisiana, a state in the USA. Sue Ann lived in St. Mary, Louisiana, and Louise in St
Mary, Louisiana, Jamaica (124-125).

These women’s subjectivities are so fluid that the borders of their geographic histories
overlap and are almost interchangeable; their identities merge and overlap as well. The
borders that separate them as individuals are blurry in certain instances.

The topic of gender arises through Ella’s struggle over what home is and how her
gender ideologies have changed as she migrated from New York to Louisiana and as she
comes to terms with her past migration from Jamaica. Her Jamaican past brings the issue of
nationality or origin to the forefront in this novel as she sees herself as African-American as
well as Jamaican. The triangularization which takes place in the novel is exemplary not only
of the Middle Passage because of its triangular route from Africa to Europe to the United
States or from Africa to the Caribbean to the United States, but of Ella’s journey as well. It
also affects a recognition that these journeys continue in and through migratory
subjectivities.
Davies mentions New Orleans in her discussion of migratory subjectivities. She comments on the vast possibilities of implications of categorizations in discussing a different way of looking at terms such as “Black.” Davies writes, “…or the more expansive implications of the category ‘African-American’ or ‘Caribbean’ (reaching to New Orleans and Columbia in some formulations), then we are talking in a transnational or global context which eschews localized minority status and recognizes these as attempts to place nation-state/binding identity status on transnational identities” (14-15). It is fitting that New Orleans, Louisiana is the geographical setting for Ella’s transformation into a subject, a transformation that changes her name to Louisiana, which connects the shores of the Caribbean in terms of subjectivity, just as the physical location, Louisiana does. New Orleans, in particular is a geographical location often considered key in theories of hybridity and creolization. Voodoo, an aspect of the novel represented by the character of Marie Laveau, is part of New Orleans’ culture. It is a hybrid of Catholicism and tribal traditions. Madame Laveau is a visionary and key figure in voodoo culture and in this novel Ella, at this point Louisiana, takes over her practice. Nationality is fluid and the Caribbean becomes theorized as the most fluid of origins in Davies’s writing. Through the intensity and frequency of migration through and from the Caribbean, nationality has become central in discussions of migration.

The issue of race comes to the forefront through Ella’s boyfriend, Reuben Kohl’s dealings with home and his past migrations. He is from the Congo of Africa, where a mission priest adopts him and takes him to Antwerp. Reuben studies in Europe and migrates to New York to study anthropology where he meets Ella. He eventually migrates to Louisiana where he too transforms and reconnects with himself and his origins. Once he gets
into the jazz movement becoming popular at the time, he migrates between Louisiana and Chicago. When in St. Mary’s, Reuben is mistaken for a Reuben Cole who had been in the area ten years previous to Reuben Kohl’s arrival. Here again, Brodber blurs subjectivities. Reuben Cole had been a union organizer, white, and banned from the area. The town accepted Reuben because of the memory he evoked.

Mrs. Forbes, a character who acts as a guide in the novel, introduces Ella and Reuben to Congo Square, New Orleans, the next leg of their journey. Reuben is ecstatic about the concept of reconnecting. Ella describes it, “Now we were spending time in Congo Square and I was perfectly convinced that Reuben was right: he had found his family; he had found his tall oak with capillaries doubling back to home” (Brodber 79). In reconnecting with his home, Reuben does not ignore the European aspect of his life, he integrates it. It fuses with his life in Congo Square. Ella continues, “We were now discussing forms of livelihood that could support his stay here. With his facility with European languages, the European interest in jazz and the desire of jazz musicians to be exposed to Europe, he could open a language school for musicians” (Brodber 79). These passages reveal the extent to which hybridity is central to Louisiana, and specifically, New Orleans.

In discussing theories of hybridity Deborah A. Kapchan and Pauline Turner Strong, in their article, “Theorizing the Hybrid,” consider hybridity in Creole cultures. Kapchan and Strong write, “Indeed, the historic impetus for creolizations of all sorts is exchange. Arising from the need to communicate across linguistic and cultural boundaries, creole languages facilitate the transfer of goods and capital, whether symbolic, aesthetic, or economic” (241). Creole can be seen, as Kapchan and Strong describe it, as “an interlocutor of hybridity” (241). Hybridity, then, comes from a “need to communicate” and allows a “transfer” of
many things, be they ideas or music. Brodber’s *Louisiana* exemplifies and expands this type of hybridity. Brodber adds subjectivity to the list of possibilities when discussing hybridization. Louisiana is a place, and Ella/Louisiana, if the idea is expanded to include her subjectivity, a space, for fusions of culture, geography and spirituality. Reuben is a character who exemplifies hybridity. Ella is central to his concept of home and in this manner Brodber writes Reuben’s subjectivity through Ella, keeping the narrative focused on the female characters in the novel. The concept of home and reconnecting to it is what generates hybridity. This is seen in Reuben’s desire to find a way to reconnect with the Congo.

It is not resolved in the novel, however, whether either Reuben or Ella/Louisiana returns to their home, in the sense of home as the place of origin. Louisiana dies before she can return to Jamaica and is buried in New Orleans. Reuben journeys to Jamaica after her death in order to inform her parents, only to find that they have moved to Connecticut, and the novel ends on a note which suggests he will journey to the Congo of Africa as well. Reuben describes his possible return as, “an extension of the community” (Brodber 166).

Home is not simply theorized as a site of reconnection; it is often theorized, especially by feminist theorists, as a site of struggle as discussed earlier. In her introduction to migratory subjectivities, Davies quotes the feminist writer bell hooks in describing home: “Still, ‘homeplace,’ as bell hooks would term it, can be a site of resistance if one understands some of the historical roots of oppression. And in this context, movement or crossing-over is a necessary antidote to the paralysis of oppression and depression…” (16). Ella feels this “paralysis” at home in New York with her parents. They constantly make attempts to separate her from her West Indian roots and mold her into what they consider a successful young woman in the United States. Ella describes the sorrow she feels for her parents and
their loneliness. According to Ella, “Warmth and companionship were sorely needed. Surely I wouldn’t do. I sensed that. Why else were they so rarely with me” (Brodber 39). She describes her parents as “two independent circles which hardly touched” (Brodber 39). Her parents eventually disconnect their lives completely from hers as she becomes Louisiana. They do not return her letters and move to Jamaica leaving her a check with a lawyer (Brodber 134-135). Reconnection, in this case, is not a possibility. “Home” for Ella becomes apparent to her as she becomes Louisiana and recognizes the value of psychological space and multiplicity of locations. Her home is not one, but many spaces and places.

Her parents depend upon the institutions that Ella conceptually decenters as she becomes Louisiana: the university, the church and traditional medicine. Her parents had wanted her to become a doctor and when she didn’t they told their friends it was because she was pregnant. They do not accept her as a healer. They wanted her to continue her job at Columbia University, recording stories in the South. They do not accept her methods of recording stories when she splits from the university and becomes Louisiana. Ella also describes her mother’s Episcopalian church and how the words that it emphasized appeared to her as “grates”: “These words—‘dread’, ‘aweful’, ‘confounded’—were on name plates in any path I had to tread, rather like the iron grates over a city’s sewage. These iron grates are set in concrete and are predictable more or less. You will find them at the side of the road near the curb” (Brodber 43). She feels that she does not fit into this construction: “My grates were structurally different. In fact they weren’t grates at all. They were name plates and could appear anywhere on the street or the side walk. They belonged to another civilization and the modern day had not unearthed the key to their location” (Brodber 43).
Her alienation from her home and her parents demonstrates hooks’ idea of home as a “site of struggle.”

Davies quotes hooks again, showing that “home” as a place of “alienation and estrangement” can be transformed. According to hooks:

Then home is no longer just one place. It is locations. Home is that place which enables and promotes varied and everchanging perspectives, a place where one discovers new ways of seeing reality, frontiers of difference. One confronts and accepts dispersal, fragmentation as part of the construction of a new world order that reveals more fully were we are, who we can become, an order that does not demand forgetting (qtd. in Davies, 49).

This is the sense of home that Louisiana comes to recognize as her own once she has become Louisiana and no longer considers herself Ella. She has allowed herself to enter into this new, expanded idea of home as a series of “locations.” She does not forget her past and the home where she felt the “alienation and estrangement.” Ella comments, “I had forgiven my parents long ago and had opened dialogue with them. Another one sided affair” (Brodber 132). She has accepted the “dispersal and fragmentation” in order to become Louisiana. Her new sense of home as a series of geographic and psychological locations allows her to see herself at home when communicating with the West Indian men with whom who she works as a visionary, when communicating with Mammy and Lowly, and when she is in New Orleans.

This sense of home allows a fluidity of boundaries that reinforces migratory subjectivity in Brodber’s novel. It is a sense of home that allows border crossing. Home is not simply a geographical location in the novel. It implies a sense of psychological space and spiritual place that includes and goes beyond geographical location. It is not conceptualized as unproblematic. It includes these ideas and expands upon and extends
them. Home is fully realized as a group of “locations,” with an emphasis on the sense of plurality, in the novel *Louisiana*.

This plurality of locations, both physical and spiritual, is necessary to understand Brodber’s writing of migratory subjectivities. A plurality of locations de-centers typical centers, such as metropolitan cities and academic universities, as it expands them. In this manner a voice is given to locations that have previously been silenced, allowing plurivocality to be valued through plurilocality, as Kamuf suggests. The geographical triangles that result, however, are not the only triangles functioning in Brodber’s novel.

Brodber includes spiritual triangles in *Louisiana*. These triangles connect individuals beyond boundaries of time, space, and place. These connections display the procreative features of place and space. The two Louisianas in the novel, one in Jamaica and the other in the United States, give birth to *Louisiana* as the transformed Ella. The spiritual triangle that ties Mammy to Lowly and Ella shows the connection of Mammy and Lowly as forces that give birth to *Louisiana* (formerly Ella) and at the same time to the entire novel bearing that name. Triangularization allows movement by communication between the past and the present and “different shores of the Caribbean sea” without actual physical movement. The idea of concentric triangles, or “triangles within triangles,” allows points on different triangles to coincide and connect. This movement in spiritual space, or psychological place, also reinforces the concept of a migratory subjectivity. Boundaries in this case are fluid and crossed.

The concept of home in this novel begins by denoting “estrangement and alienation,” then expands to recognize the plurality that allows a fuller realization of being. In this plurality of locations that is considered home, a migratory subjectivity can exist since
movement is accepted and encouraged. Movement, in this sense, includes physical location as well as subject positioning.

Migratory subjectivities are central to Brodber’s presentation of the resisting subject in her novel. This subject resists the specifics of location, subject positioning, subordination, domination, and subjugation. Movement is what allows migratory subjectivity to elude and resist these specifics. The ever-changing settings of *Louisiana* work to reinforce the formation and dynamism of the many and varied migratory subjectivities in the novel.
Conclusions

Pérez’s *Geographies of Home* and Brodber’s *Louisiana* can both be understood as novels that focus on migration and migratory subjectivities. Most importantly, however, both novels are unique in valuing difference. Difference is not degraded or silenced in either novel. It is celebrated, brought to the center, and given a voice in the narratives of the migratory subjectivities created by these women authors. Pérez and Brodber recognize the importance of migration stories as a means of bringing restrictive categorizations of race, nationality, and gender into intense focus around the concept of home. What their writing allows the reader to realize in particular is that these issues are not resolved and do not need to be. They show in fact, that difference and resistance to closure in all these categories are more progressive and indicative of migratory subjectivities than resolution and closure.

Movement between geographic sites creates hyphenated identities, but also much more, by creating a model for seemingly conflicting differences such as dutiful, traditional daughter and professional, American woman, racial blackness and Hispanic ethnicity, independent businesswoman and traditional housewife.

Subject positioning is central in both novels. In each instance, the more movement the migratory subjectivities engage in the more power they gain. In Pérez’s *Geographies of Home*, Iliana gains power as a subject by leaving her home. The same is true for Ella in Brodber’s *Louisiana*. Both characters feel dissatisfied at home and realize their potential as they migrate away from and reconnect with their homes. Household power struggles become
central to other issues of categorization such as color, origin, and femininity. However, as Lawson argues, household divisions structuring the lives of these female protagonists are not strict, but instead should be viewed as “fluid and complex” (40). It is through this fluidity and complexity that the boundaries of categories can be crossed and questioned. Home is represented as a site of struggle and as a site of potential liberation for the women in these novels.

Home as a concept also becomes realized as a variety of locations by the female characters struggling with what home is, has the potential to be, and how it can work for them instead of against them. Home can incite “paralysis” as bell hooks suggests (qtd. in Davies, 16), a kind of paralysis that Iliana and Ella struggle to overcome in dealing with the concept of home. Their ways of approaching the struggle are distinct and each is complex in its own way. All protagonists overcome obstacles. What is unique to these women and their struggles for and against home is that the concept of home is eventually recognized as a plurality of geographical, as well as psychological, locations.

When home is realized as multiple locations, evoking the kind of plurilocality that Kamuf describes (111), boundaries are recognized as fluid and migratory subjectivities are supported in their conflicting aspects of identity. Not only is movement accepted and encouraged when home is recognized as many locations, the very concept of home is expanded to include emotional space as well as physical place. As a result, home is never static, but a state of being rather than a physical location, an ever-changing dynamic that shifts across geographic and psychological planes without coming to rest.

The issue of gender ideologies is often struggled over at home as a result of migration. Gender ideologies are culturally influenced and as migration occurs they change
or have the possibility to change. Pessar and Mahler question this possibility as well as the possibility of reinforcing ideologies of national origin (5). Pérez’s and Brodber’s writings in *Geographies of Home* and *Louisiana*, respectively, offer affirmative answers to both of Pessar and Mahler’s questions. Migration can reinforce prevailing gender ideologies as demonstrated by the father figures in each novel. Desperate to keep their daughters submissive to dominant marital standards they also push them to be successful and fulfill the American dream. And yes, transnational migration does provide openings for both genders to question hegemonic notions of gender and to entertain competing understandings of gendered lives. Iliana, in Pérez’s *Geographies of Home*, keeps her father’s rules of abstinence while away at college pursuing an educational degree higher than any her father or any woman in her family has previously achieved. Ella, in Brodber’s *Louisiana*, takes on a traditional gendered role of housewife while at the same time supporting her household as a visionary in their community. This “both/and” answer to Pessar and Mahler’s question provides another powerful model proving the inclusiveness and valuing of difference resulting from migration in the novels.

The dualistic nature of gender ideologies for the families in both novels results from transnational migration. Both Iliana and Ella are expected to be successful career women and fulfill the American dream in that sense. However, they are also expected to remain chaste and get married to a successful man in a traditional manner. Iliana and Ella each confront this dual expectation of the gender ideologies of their parents by leaving home to form and strengthen their own unique ideologies appropriate to their individual migratory subjectivities. In these novels, physical displacement creates an opportunity for female
heroines to demonstrate that it is possible for conflicting gender priorities to clash and remain unresolved due to migration.

Similarly, the issue of nationality or origin is a cause of confrontation and internal struggle at home in both *Geographies of Home* and *Louisiana*. Iliana never fully realizes the visionary powers she inherits from her mother as this is part of the past her mother wishes to hide from her daughter. Thus, Iliana struggles with the visions she originally assumes to be the work of the devil. Her mother, Aurelia, migrates cognitively, employing her own visionary powers to return to the Dominican Republic and days past.

While Ella’s parents rarely tell her anything about her place of origin, Jamaica, Iliana’s parents only tell her what they feel will not harm her. Ella learns much of her past through cognitive migration and employing her powers as a visionary. She travels through time and space to see herself as a baby growing up in her grandmother’s home in Jamaica. It is extremely traumatic for her to learn of her past in this manner rather than hearing it from supportive parents. By denying their children parts of their heritage and origin the parents in both novels add to the familial struggle over nationality. This denial also adds to the internal struggles their children face when redefining their subjectivities in a manner that is not geographically based, but instead as subjectivities that move between the categories of race, gender, and nationality as they shift from one location to another. As Davies writes, nationality is a fluid concept in the Caribbean, considering that most borders are the seas (14-15). The frequency and intensity of Caribbean migration is central to the stories of the female heroines in *Geographies of Home* and *Louisiana*.

Only when nationality is recognized as a fluid concept, can the characters in these novels come to terms with their own hyphenated nationalities. The term “fluid” here
connotes an ever-changing movement that does not recognize borders and cannot be contained and circumscribed. In this sense, the characters’ identities can constantly change from one state to another. The term “hyphenated” normally indicates two seemingly equal parts joined together in a whole, however arbitrarily or artificially this juncture is formed. It is employed here as a term to describe how the characters can put their nationalities into words that act as a tentative explanation for others who require an explanation.

Race is also fluid and hyphenated for the characters of Geographies of Home and Louisiana. Iliana is often mistaken as black only or Hispanic only. She speaks Spanish and is seen as Hispanic, but her skin is dark so she is seen as black. She claims both as her heritage, knowing the history of the Dominican Republic and the Caribbean in the Middle Passage, she recognizes her African heritage as well as her Hispanic heritage. These come together in her Dominican, Caribbean heritage, although she is persecuted for both separately at school and at home. For Ella’s husband, Reuben, who was adopted from the Congo by a white priest, race has always been an issue. When he arrives in Louisiana, he is mistaken for a white man local to the area. Only when he reconnects with his concept of home can he come to terms with his racial identity as a black man from the Congo. Nationality and race are intricately tied together for these characters.

Migration raises questions for categories of identity. In Geographies of Home and Louisiana, the focus is on the categories of nationality, gender, and race. The concept of home is imperative to this focus since it is the central site of struggle for the characters dealing with categorizations. Through the narrated lives of Pérez’s and Brodber’s female characters, the importance of the resisting subject as migratory subjectivity is enhanced and centralized. The migratory subjectivities in these novels resist subordination by constantly
negotiating the categories of origin, femininity, and color. Through migration and the resultant redefinitions of the concept of home, the process of categorization itself is called into question.

Categorization and the ways that categories become reified is a broader question brought to the reader’s attention when looking at *Geographies of Home* and *Louisiana* through the lens of feminist migration theory. Categories of gender, nationality, and race can be understood as borders on a map, to quote Kamuf’s powerful metaphor again. They are arbitrary and formed in relation to dynamic forces like the sea. How can lines on a map, borders, be fixed if the sea is constantly eroding them? Likewise, how can categories of nationality, race, gender and the shifting concept of home that constantly redefines them be reified within a context of globalization and migration? It is difficult, and perhaps even impossible, to categorize the novels examined here as national literatures because of their authors’ migrations. In this case, national literatures truly are transnational literatures. The borders of this category too are fluid.
Notes


ii Other novels categorized as African American literature and including the topic of migration in some manner include: Paule Marshall, Praisesong for the Widow (New York: Plume, 1983); Phyllis Alesia Perry, Stigmata (New York: Anchor Books, 1998); and Jean Toomer, Cane (1923, New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1983).


Works Cited


